



Jean Lafitte: History and Mystery

Who Was Jean Lafitte?

Mystery and legend surround the life of Jean Lafitte. Was he a pirate, a patriot, or both? Is his last name spelled “Lafitte” or “Laffite”? Even the date and place of his birth and death are unknown. He was probably born in the early 1780s in either France or the French colony of St. Domingue (now Haiti) in the Caribbean. By 1810 he was in Louisiana with his older brother Pierre. They might have been businessmen in New Orleans or independent privateers before becoming associated with the smugglers of Barataria.

Pirates, Smugglers, and Privateers

Lafitte always insisted that if he committed any crime, it was smuggling, and he blamed American laws for forcing him into illegal activities. In 1807 the United States outlawed trade with Great Britain and France because of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. Merchants in New Orleans began to run out of goods to sell.

Around the same time it became illegal to bring slaves from Africa into Louisiana; it later became illegal to import slaves into the rest of the United States. Louisiana planters had a hard time buying enough American-born slaves to work on their ever-expanding sugar and cotton plantations. Merchants and planters were eager to buy the goods and slaves Lafitte smuggled into south Louisiana.

Lafitte also always insisted that he was a privateer, not a pirate. (He was actually more of a land-based businessman than a privateer or pirate at sea.) A privateer has permission from a government at war to capture any enemy ships.

The city of Cartagena in present-day Columbia had rebelled against Spain and gave permission through letters of marque for privateers, including Lafitte’s men, to capture Spanish ships and the goods and slaves on board. However, the United States did not recognize the government of Cartagena as a legal one and U.S. officials suspected Lafitte’s men of attacking any ships they saw, and so the U.S. government charged Lafitte and his crew with piracy:

The Baratarians

The men working for Lafitte were called Baratarians because the waterways they used for smuggling were located in an area called Barataria (the Barataria Preserve of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve is located in this area). Barataria’s swamps and bayous stretched south of New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico. This area had been famous for smuggling even before privateers arrived in 1810 to use the deep water harbor of Barataria Bay.

By 1812 Lafitte was the leader of the Baratarians with headquarters on Grand Terre, a barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico near Grand Isle. Lafitte may have had as many as 1000 people working for him, including free men of color and runaway slaves.

Throughout Barataria, Lafitte built warehouses to store goods and pens to hold slaves. Merchants and planters came to Barataria for auctions, which Lafitte held outside New Orleans to avoid the law. His knowledge of the swamps helped him to make quick getaways. Several times customs officials and soldiers tried to capture Lafitte in the swamps, but they were usually captured, wounded, or killed by the Baratarians.

In 1812, several Baratarians including both Pierre and Jean Lafitte were captured but jumped bail. In the summer of 1814, Pierre was arrested and jailed in New Orleans, but he escaped from jail under mysterious circumstances in September.

The Pirate Turns Patriot

Lafitte’s image changed from pirate to patriot during the War of 1812. Britain and the United States declared war in June 1812, but until 1814, most of the fighting took place on the east coast or northern border of the United States.

In September 1814, British military officials sought Lafitte’s help in their campaign to attack the U.S. from the Gulf of Mexico. Lafitte decided to warn American authorities and offered to help defend New Orleans in exchange for a pardon for his men. His warnings were not believed at first and the U.S. Army and Navy went ahead with a planned attack on Lafitte’s base at Grand Terre.

Although General Andrew Jackson, commander of the American troops, originally described Lafitte as a “hellish banditti,” he finally accepted Lafitte’s help because of the ammunition, cannoneers, and knowledge of the area Lafitte could supply.

The expert cannon fire of Jackson’s troops, including Lafitte’s Baratarians, contributed to the American victories during the New Orleans campaign that culminated with the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815. Most of these battles took place at or near Chalmette Plantation, now Chalmette Battlefield and part of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve.

What Happened to Jean Lafitte?

Thankful for their help with the American victory, in February 1815 President James Madison offered pardons to the Baratarians for any crimes committed against the United States. Many of the Baratarians settled in New Orleans or in the Barataria area and some of their descendants still live there today.

Lafitte eventually returned to smuggling at Galveston Island in Spanish Texas until he was forced out by the U.S. Navy in 1820. His exact whereabouts after that are unknown. His life and death remain as mysterious as the swamps and bayous of Barataria.

Myths and Mysteries

As the years passed, Lafitte became a legendary figure in south Louisiana. Are the stories true?

Did the Lafittes own a blacksmith shop in New Orleans’ French Quarter? An 1802 newspaper ad mentioned a blacksmith named Lafitte, but no first name was given and the shop was not at the corner of Bourbon and St. Phillip streets where the business known as Jean Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop stands today. The story may have begun because Pierre Lafitte’s mistress owned a building on St. Phillip Street across from today’s Blacksmith Shop.



Lafitte is known to have had at least one ship like this one in his fleet. It is a hermaphrodite brig or a brigantine, with square sails like a brig and triangular sails like a schooner, allowing for speed in every wind condition and requiring a relatively small crew. Image: Peabody Essex Museum.

Did Lafitte always respect the American flag? In the 1938 and 1958 films *The Buccaneer*, Lafitte claims he never attacked an American ship. Actually, his men attacked several American ships but apparently did not kill any crewmen, possibly because they did not fight back. Lafitte’s men did resist arrest by American federal agents and soldiers, wounding, murdering, and capturing several.

Did Lafitte write a memoir? In the 1950s, a man claiming to be a descendant of Lafitte published “The Journal of Jean Laffite.” The journal was republished in the 1990s as “The Memoirs of Jean Laffite.” A major theme in the memoir/journal is Lafitte’s change of heart from slave trader to anti-slavery activist. The man also owned documents claiming Lafitte lived until the 1850s and was buried in Alton, Illinois. Most historians doubt the authenticity of these claims but have not been able to disprove them.

Is Lafitte buried in the town of Lafitte, Louisiana? This story first appeared in a local newspaper in the 1920s from an unnamed source and has no basis in fact. The story claimed that American Revolutionary War naval hero John Paul Jones was the uncle of Jean Lafitte and Napoleon Bonaparte and that the two were cousins. After Napoleon’s exile to St. Helena by the English in 1815, the story says that Lafitte put a double in his place and smuggled him into the United States, but Napoleon died on the trip. Lafitte then was supposed to have buried Napoleon in the town of Lafitte’s Perrin Cemetery; later Jones and Lafitte himself were buried there. It is quite certain that Napoleon is buried in Paris and that Jones, who died in 1792, is buried at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Lafitte’s final resting place is unknown.

Why is a National Park Named for Jean Lafitte?

In 1966, Louisiana authorized a state park to be established at the present site of the Barataria Preserve. The park was named after Lafitte because of his smuggling operations in the area.

In 1978, Congress created Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, combining Chalmette National Historical Park (established in 1938) with the Louisiana state park and authorizing a visitor center in the French Quarter. The park was given the mission of preserving the natural and cultural resources of Louisiana’s Mississippi River delta region. Lafitte was associated with the three original sites of the park: he roamed the streets of New Orleans’ French

Quarter, navigated the swamps of the Barataria Preserve, and helped the Americans win the Battle of New Orleans at Chalmette Battlefield.

Later, the Acadian Cultural Center in Lafayette, the Prairie Acadian Cultural Center in Eunice, and the Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center in Thibodaux were added to the park, and stories connect Lafitte with those areas too.

The legend of Jean Lafitte survives in the history and mystery of south Louisiana, where Lafitte’s bayous and backwaters still meander toward the Gulf of Mexico.